

Testimony of New Democrat Coalition Chair Rep. Jim Himes, CT-04, to the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform on June 27, 2018

I would like to thank the bipartisan co-chairs and all Members of this panel for bringing us together today to discuss an issue at the heart of democratic governance: how to budget, raise revenue and spend on a rational, fiscally sustainable path. As Chair of the New Democrat Coalition, I'm proud that our forward-thinking Members have been at the forefront of reform, looking for opportunities to plan for our future in a thoughtful, bipartisan and rational way, which is the exact opposite of how this process has worked for as long as I've served here.

It's no exaggeration to say that this chaotic, top-down process has helped push congressional approval ratings and trust in government itself to historic lows. I've been here long enough to know that almost no one in or around Congress is interested in real fiscal responsibility. Republicans are horrified by the deficits right up until the moment there is no longer a Democratic president to blame for them. Democrats are all too often seen spending on the first solution to a problem. Special interests and our constituents also all have their wish lists, but no one wants to pay for them.

This broken process, replete with shutdown threats, stop gap measures, and a useless debt ceiling, threatens the promises made to older generations of Americans and the pledge we make to our kids to leave the world better for them than we found it. The massive national debt, driven ever-higher just this Congress by an unpaid for tax bill whose benefits skew to the wealthy and the super wealthy, represents escalating risks to our national and economic security. Left untouched, it will drive calls for massive cuts to Medicare and Social Security, and crowd out spending for education, infrastructure and the tools we need to give every American child the opportunity to earn a decent living in a changing economy.

There is only one question now: Who is going to blow the whistle on this whole sorry process? Will it be the Congress or the capital markets when they finally decide to teach us all the meaning of the word "unsustainable"? I am heartened by the convening of this committee, and humbly recommend you consider the following:

First, do no harm – defuse the destruction that the fiction of a debt ceiling can cause to markets and the lives of everyday Americans, and remove the incentive for ideological grandstanding and destructive hostage taking that we've seen too often in the past. Stop attacking the Congressional Budget Office when its estimates don't match your Hopes and dreams.

Be honest and level with the American people on the complex nature of the problem and the big steps we must take to solve it. This body tried this once before with the Simpson-Bowles Commission, which represented a genuine compromise of shared sacrifice toward sustainability. While I and many fellow New Democrats and thoughtful Republicans supported this six years ago, you can see from our very presence here today it didn't work out too well.

So what does it mean to be honest? Honesty requires a real budgetary process, not an optics-oriented partisan exercise. Honesty requires real public debate driven by facts instead of ideological fervor driven by special interest agendas. Honesty requires more Member input and real changes to the process that can allow room for debate. I encourage you to find ways to enshrine facts, honest arguments and real, genuine debate into the budget process.

Plan for the long haul. Bring Members together early to look at the far out horizon, come to consensus and develop a plan that can outlast the shifting partisan winds. This could include a switch to biennial budgeting, including hard monetary allocations that genuinely last a full Congress and allow agencies to efficiently plan and spend. It could involve bipartisan planning meetings at the beginning of each session, with procedures in place rewarding compromise and surety at the front end. And perhaps we could make room in the partisan, message-driven budgeting process to allow for consideration of a bipartisan budget resembling one we often ultimately end up with, months too late and after billions of dollars wasted.

Thank you again for your hard work, and I associate myself with the remarks of my fellow New Dems who have testified before this panel, the work of its thoughtful New Dem Member, Mr. Kilmer, and all the proposals New Dems have brought to the table. Let me leave you with this: if this committee and this Congress is serious about making government work, bringing bipartisanship and reason back to budgeting, and charting our country on a fiscally responsible path, the New Democrat Coalition is right here waiting to move our country forward.